

by **Suketu**

My 1st ever encounter of Edberg was watching him lose the 1987 US Open semifinals to the relentless Ivan Lendl. Until then I, like most Indian kids, was a diehard cricket fan with hardly any interest in other sports.

Little did I know the profound effect that Stefan would have on my life from then on. It really is unfortunate that even after winning 6 Slams, 41 singles titles and 18 doubles titles besides an Olympic Gold and leading Sweden to Davis Cup victory 3 times, this unassuming Swede is remembered as a "chocker".

The press often highlighted his "there's another tournament next week" attitude after losing in a tournament. They chided him for his lack of power play. In reality Edberg was far from that.

Who else would have won the 1987 Aussie Open against local boy Pat Cash after squandering a 2 sets to 0 lead in front of the fiery home crowd? Who else would have won Wimbledon after being totally buried and 2 sets to 0 down against the mercurial Czech Mecnir? Who else would have won the Masters 1989 that began with the preassumption that Stefan was the perfect no 3 and the tournament was meant to decide who was no 1-Becker or Lendl? Who can forget Edberg's amazing run in not just the 1990 Wimbledon but also the 1992 US Open? And wasn't it Edberg also who crushed Courier in the 1991 US Open in probably the most one-sided final ever in the history of the Open?

Let's look back at 2 golden Slams of Edberg

1990 Wimbledon: After losing 1st round at the French, Stefan had a lot to prove. Lendl was on his obsessive mission of Winning Wimbledon (after convincingly winning Queens that year) after coming so close the previous year. Becker, who had a no eventful year in the Slams so far, never left his guts at home when he came to Wimbledon.

But before Stefan could tackle either of them, he had to get passed a difficult customer in Israeli Amos Mansdorf in the 1st week. Edberg managed to win in 5 tight sets but only just. Few rounds later, he faced Lendl who was anything but short of confidence after practicing on grass for a month and demolishing Becker in the finals at Queens, the warm up to Wimbledon.

Stefan was expected to lose tamely but shell-shocked all by routing the luckless Lendl in straight sets to march against his 3rd consecutive Wimbledon final against old rival Becker. Surely he would not create much of an impression on Becker, they said. Edberg had different ideas though. He started the Becker match right from where he left off against Lendl running to a 2 sets to 0 lead. Becker tried to strive off the challenge taking the match to the decider only to come across a few of Edberg's precise backhand volleys and impregnable defense at the net.

As one who watched the entire match as a 15 yr old, much in anticipation, I would have to say

Edberg's craft at the net in the final set of this match was right up there as the best ever.

1992 US Open: Stefan came into the tournament as defending champion under enormous pressure with most people writing him off after a disappointing year saying that his marriage meant his game had taken a backseat. Edberg, who has rarely played his best at the USOpen (where often players have to play well passed midnight in a schedule dictated by sheer commercial interests of TV broadcasting rights) was heading home in his 4th round match against hard serving Dutchman Richard Krajicek going down a break in the final set.

Using the chip/charge effectively and taking control of the net, Stefan quelled the Krajicek challenge to face old rival Lendl next. Lendl often dominated Stefan in his earlier days but since last 3-4 yrs Stefan had almost always got the better of him. Not surprisingly Edberg had a 2 sets to 0 lead and had matchpoints in the 3rd set only to lose it and the 4th.

In fact he was a break down in the final set (it all seemed to be a repeat of the Aussie Open semis the previous year when Edberg had match points in the 4th set only to lose to, who else, but Lendl in 5) and it seemed all over. Edberg, however, broke Lendl, took the match to a tiebreak and just about escaped from jail winning it with some help from "a net" (his wife Annette too!!) to face Mr Never-say-die Michael Chang.

Here too it went to the decider set with both players exchanging incredible rallies and getting back seemingly impossible returns. Chang was up a break in the 5th but Edberg came storming back towards the end to win 6-4 and face a rejuvenated Sampras in the finals. Edberg lost the 1st set but won the next 3 to lift his 2nd successive USOpen and his 6th Slam overall.

Just as exciting as his wins above were, his losses were just as hearthbreaking. Really he should have never ever lost to 17 yr old Chang in the 1989 French Open finals after being firmly in control with a 2 sets to 1 lead.

And who can forget his loss to Lendl at 1991 Aussie Open semis when he doublefaulted on matchpoint up in the 4th to lose in 5?

Worst was to follow the same year when he lost to German Stich in Wimbledon semis 64,67,67,67 incredibly without ever losing his serve. His having to retire hurt 1990 Aussie Open finals against Lendl was equally disappointing after he had "killed" Wilander in the semis.

His losses to Courier 1993 Wimbledon and Martin 1994 Aussie Open semis did no justice to his wonderful opportunities he created for himself especially when one considers that had he won both those matches he would have been up against Sampras who till that point of time was Edberg's "bunny". And finally Edberg's 2-6,0-6 loss to Philippoussis indoors in late 1995 was one of his most disappointing results ever.

In spite of all this, Edberg has probably been the most underestimated top player since the Open era. A lot of this has to do with his modest, nonassuming nature. He has never had the aura of a Becker nor the showmanship of an Agassi or the irreverence of a Mcenroe.

Edberg was, in all probabilities, just like your neighbour next door. An instance (narrated by Andrea Jaeger) comes to my mind. Edberg was about to leave the Queens club restaurant (during a rain delay interruption while playing Becker in the finals in the late 80's). An 80 year old lady just then entered the restaurant and Stefan being the perfect gentleman that he is opened the door for her. Guess what? She took out 2 pounds to tip him! Needless to say he refused to accept it.

A great player and an even greater human being. His behavior both on and off court has been exemplary. No wonder he was awarded the ATP Tour trophy of sportsmanship and fair play for 3 consecutive years (all votes given by his fellow players speak for itself).

Regarding his game, his kick serve especially from the ad court, was one of the best. His backhand volley especially the inside out one was the best ever. And boy I'd go miles to watch his perfect backhanded great anticipation at the net.

He has been the undisputable best ever serve and volleyer in the game. For all those who questioned his big match temperament and mental strength, it is indeed ironical as he always played to his strength. His attitude was "I will serve and volley and attack the net constantly. If you want to beat me you will have to do it at the net." Stefan would serve and volley 22 consecutive times. You pass him 22 consecutive times. What would he do the 23rd time? Serve and volley, no doubt. Stefan had incredible confidence in his strengths which is what separated him from the rest.

Here's what Brad Gilbert, a former top 5 player, said about Stefan in his book, "Winning Ugly" "Stefan is workman-like in his approach to playing. His game can be almost boring to watch because its so predictable but he gets fantastic results. He has a very simple strategy based on his strengths and he pursues it relentlessly. You never bet a chance to see Stefan get discouraged. His composure is the same whether he's ahead or behind. He won't allow you the boost of seeing him get down on himself mentally."

As for me no doubt my finest moment was when I saw him personally in London June 1996 playing Sandon Stolle in Queen's. Even though he had already announced in early 1996 that this was his last year on tour, it was clearly evident that he still had a lot of tennis in him.

He reached the finals of this event beating Ivanisevic, Martin and Muster on the way before falling to Becker in the finals.

Last year I asked my friend in London about Stefan's address in Kensington (in London). While she did find out and forward to me, I soon discovered that Stefan has already left for good for his home in Sweden. I addressed a letter to him in his city (with a vague address) hoping that the postman would do his job. The postman did his job as the letter never came back to me in spite of a return address.

How I wish we could roll back the years and I could be a 17 year old again watching Edberg win the 1992 US Open the way he did. Since he has retired a lot has happened: Sampras has gone on to win 13 Slams, till date, Agassi 7, Rafter has won 2 and Hewitt is beginning to show

the promise which might confirm his dominance in men's tennis for sometime.

But none are even close to the suave Edberg's delicate backhand volleys or his unassuming character. Tennis will never be the same without him. Not just a great champion but an ideal role model for anyone in life. They don't make them like him anymore.